

VZCZCXRO5016  
PP RUEHPA RUEHTRO  
DE RUEHNK #0230/01 0901107  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 311107Z MAR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8272  
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0541  
RUEHDO/AMEMBASSY DOHA 0479  
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 2084  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0889  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0557  
RUEHPG/AMEMBASSY PRAGUE 0114  
RHMFISS/COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE  
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0577  
RUEHDS/USMISSION USAU ADDIS ABABA  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0998

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000230

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/30/2019

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: INSIDE THE MAURITANIAN JUDICIAL SYSTEM: ONE  
DETAINEE'S STORY

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 211

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[11](#). (C) Summary: Journalist and Editor-in-Chief Cheikh Tijani Ould Isselmou (pen name: Abbass Ould Braham) of the Taqadoumy website was arrested and detained March 15 after posting a story critical of the military regime (Reftel). PolAsst and PAO met with Isselmou March 26 to hear about the conditions of his detention and the treatment he received while in custody. Though verbally threatened, he was never physically abused or tortured. However, detention conditions were deplorable, and Isselmou said that other prisoners received worse treatment than he did. End summary.

[12](#). (C) The arrest: Isselmou began his account by describing his arrest. The evening of March 15, Isselmou was having coffee with some friends at a cafe when two policemen and a Commissar appeared, saying they wanted to ask him some questions. Isselmou insisted that they show their IDs before agreeing to leave with them. Isselmou stated that the Commissar's name was "Nagy" (NFI), and that he was on a list drawn up by the anti-coup FNDD that accused security personnel of involvement in the beating of FNDD protesters.

[13](#). (C) The interrogation: The police took Isselmou to the Palais de Justice, where he was questioned briefly before being transferred to the Commissariat in Riyadh 2. (Note: Isselmou explained that they transferred him to Riyadh 2, a more remote neighborhood, because it would be difficult for his family to locate him. His family visited several commissariats in an unsuccessful attempt to locate him. End note.) At the Riyadh 2 commissariat, police questioned him about how articles for Taqadoumy were posted, how many and which authors wrote for the site, and they demanded that he turn over the administrative passwords for the site. Isselmou refused to reveal the passwords, arguing that they had probably been changed anyway after his arrest. (Note: According to Isselmou, only he and Taqadoumy publisher Mohamed El Hanefi Ould Dahah know the passwords to the site. Hanefi Ould Dahah currently lives in the United States, and is therefore out of the reach of Mauritanian authorities. End note.) The Commissar insisted on the passwords, at one point threatening Isselmou that "we are about to torture you to get the passwords." Despite this verbal threat, Isselmou stated that he was never physically abused by the Commissar

or guards during his detention.

¶4. (C) Isselmou's detention conditions: Isselmou was then placed in solitary confinement. There was electricity in his cell, so he had light. However, the cell was dusty and dirty, and full of discarded chicken and fish bones in a corner. There was a mattress, but it was rotting and falling apart, and the pad on top of it was filthy. Isselmou described the toilets as "unbearable." He did not have a toilet in his cell; rather, he had to ask permission from the guards, who then escorted him down the hall where there were several communal toilets. His portable phone was confiscated, so he had no way to contact his family. He went without food for the first 24 hours of his detention, and then paid the guards to bring him some food (throughout his detention, he was able to keep money on his person). Occasionally, the Commissar allowed him to watch TV in his office. Ironically, Isselmou watched on TV the apology made by the junta's "Counselor to the President" Mohamed Ould Abdarrahoumane Ould Moine, where he termed the crackdown on the press as "regrettable." However, Isselmou was unaware that the protests petitioning for his release had been dispersed by the police with tear gas.

¶5. (C) Detention conditions for others: Isselmou provided insight on the conditions that he witnessed for other prisoners. The other prisoners were also in solitary confinement, but in dark, narrow rooms much smaller than Isselmou's. (There were three of these "cells" total at the Commissariat, plus Isselmou's "cell.") They were bound with

NOUAKCHOTT 00000230 002 OF 002

makeshift chain-linked handcuffs, and pleaded with Isselmou to tell the Commissar about their conditions. They told Isselmou they were bleeding from the handcuffs which were tied too tightly (he was unable to visually verify those claims). Isselmou described one episode when he was being escorted to the toilet. One of the other prisoners requested to use the toilet, and the policeman shouted "Silence! I won't do that for you."

¶6. (C) Not fun for the police either: Isselmou emphasized that the police were in a dire situation of their own, describing their conditions as "very miserable." One policeman told Isselmou that he was assigned to the Riyadh 2 commissariat as a punishment (for what, he didn't say). Previously, he had worked at the airport, which was considered a choice assignment because of the "deals and money that could be made" while working there (i.e., through corruption). Working at the Riyadh 2 commissariat, by contrast, did not entail any such "benefits."

¶7. (C) Comment: Isselmou's account offers a glimpse into detention conditions for prisoners. Although he was not detained at a "real" prison but at a Commissariat, this is often where people who are arrested spend their first few days. According to the December 3, 2008 Amnesty International report "Mauritania: Torture at the heart of the state," it is also when detainees are most vulnerable to torture at the hands of the police and security services. "Normal" prisoners received harsher treatment, languishing in small dark cells with their handcuffs drawn so tightly that they bled; Isselmou, a well-known journalist, appears to have fared better. Nevertheless, his "preferential" treatment was hardly a shining example of legal practices, and demonstrates how far the Mauritanian judicial system has to go in improving its treatment of detainees. End comment.

HANKINS